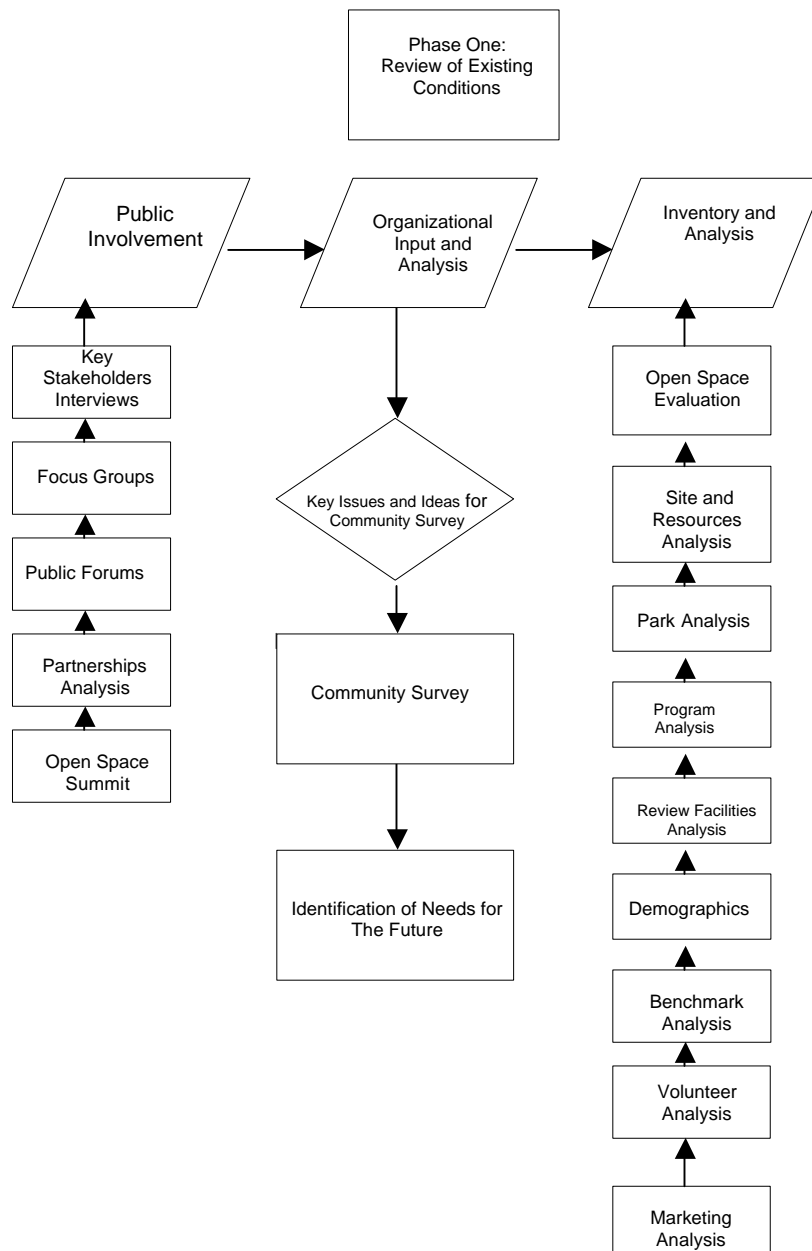


DATA COLLECTIONS

The Data Collection phase focuses on key issues that need to be addressed and the summary of results from all the data collected from the two consulting teams work. The strategies used are as follows:

Needs Assessment Study Planning Process



PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

It is imperative that the Strategic Master Plan reflects the input of the citizens of Alexandria. The community of the future is built with present day planning. Tomorrow's promises are built on dedicated efforts to include the thinking of the citizens who will be served by the department in the future. To assure the voices of the residents of Alexandria were heard in this process, extensive public involvement was encouraged.

Public input was gathered through:

- Focus group meetings with special interest groups, ethnic groups, partners, seniors, users, and neighborhood leaders.
- Stakeholder interviews with elected officials, key city Department Directors, the City Manager, and park and recreation staff.
- A series of public forums were conducted for both the open space study and the recreation needs assessment study.
- A mailed citizen survey randomly distributed within the City of Alexandria.

In order for organizational department leaders of the city and Park and Recreation staff to participate and engage in future change; it is critical to involve them in the change process. To assure there was buy-in from these leaders and staff members, a series of focus groups were conducted to gain their insight and to address key issues.

ORGANIZATIONAL INPUT AND ANALYSIS

- The consulting teams conducted recreation programs, parks and recreation facility audits. Audits were completed through on-site visitations and staff interviews.
- Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in and outside the organization, including department staff, agency heads, elected officials, community leaders, and recreation groups.
- An organizational policy review was conducted for partnerships, earned income review, systems analysis, pricing of services, organizational alignment, and efficiency.
- Mapping was conducted on land use for recreational facilities, game fields, recreation centers, passive parks, natural resources and historic areas.

The growing popularity and demand for open space, parks and recreation opportunities are in proportion to the constant growth and development in Alexandria. Numerous community issues regarding parks and recreation were identified through the public outreach process. These key issues have been grouped by function and provide the basis for recommended visions, policies, and actions.

COMMUNITY SURVEY

The City of Alexandria conducted a community attitude and interest survey during March and April of 2002 to help determine citizen usage, satisfaction, needs, and priorities for the parks and recreation system. The survey was designed to obtain statistically valid results from households throughout the City of Alexandria.

Leisure Vision/ETC Institute worked extensively with City of Alexandria officials and Leon Younger and Pros in the development of the survey questionnaire. This work allowed the survey to be tailored to issues of strategic importance to effectively plan the future system.

The goal was to obtain at least 600 completed surveys. This goal was more than accomplished, with 731 surveys being completed, including at least 200 completed surveys from each of the three Parks and Recreation Planning Districts. The results of the random sample of 731 households have a 95% level of confidence with a precision of at least +/-3.6%. The entire survey can be found on page 53a in the appendix.

Citizen Survey Findings

- Walking and biking trails (55%) had the highest percentage of respondent households rate it as one of their four most important facilities. Neighborhood parks followed at 40%.
- Multi-purpose trails (52%) had, by a wide margin, the highest percentage of respondents indicate it as one of the four new parks/ facilities they would be most willing to support with their tax dollars. This was followed by an indoor wellness and fitness facility at 27% and acquiring properties for developing new parks at 27%.
- Nearly half (44%) of respondents indicated that open space should be acquired and dedicated for natural resource purposes. This was followed by the desire that open space be acquired for both passive and active uses at (42%).
- Nearly three-fourths of respondents were either very supportive (28%) or somewhat supportive (44%) of having users of recreation programs and special events pay user fees.
- Two-thirds (66%) of respondents indicated that the City of Alexandria should develop a multi-generational indoor center that serves all ages. This far exceeded the city developing a teen center at 31% or a senior center 26%.
- Nearly 90% of respondents rated the programs as either excellent (28%) or good (60%)
- The most common reason that kept respondents from using parks and recreation facilities and programs more often was "we are too busy or not interested."
- Flyers/brochures (48%) were the most frequent way that respondents learned about the city's parks and recreation programs.
- Two-thirds (66%) of respondent households indicated they had visited a city-operated park in the last year.
- Over three-fourths (79%) of respondents rated the physical condition of city-operated parks they had visited as either excellent (27%) or good (52%).

Findings & Observations

- Festival/ special events were the programs that had the highest percentage of respondents indicating being either very satisfied (44%) or somewhat satisfied (42%) with them.
- The City of Alexandria Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities Department (45%) is the organization used by the highest percentage of respondent households.
- Over half (57%) of respondents indicated that there are enough parks, trails, and recreational facilities near their home.
- Nearly all (90%) respondents indicated that well maintained parks do enhance the property value of surrounding homes.
- Over three-fourths (78%) of respondents indicated that parks do provide economic benefit to the City of Alexandria.
- Multi-purpose trails had the highest percentage of respondents rate it as either very important (63%) or somewhat important (29%). Acquiring properties for developing new parks was 88%, and acquiring and developing multi-purpose youth and adult athletic fields were 82%.

LAND ACQUISITION AND OPEN SPACE- KEY COMMUNITY ISSUES

The key issues and findings that were defined by the community and the consulting teams are as follows:

- Citizens are particularly interested in seeing the City find solutions to the lack of open space and park space.
- There is a lack of open space continuity and connection throughout the city.
- The diminished availability of open space is due to over-development of the city.
- There is a need for more walking, jogging and bicycling trails.
- There is a lack of equity of access to neighborhood parks and open spaces within the city.
- The need for open space stewardship and protection of land that is remaining is needed particularly with regard to natural areas.
- The city needs to complete the implementation of the Potomac River Waterfront Plan.
- The city needs to protect and expand stream valleys and other environmentally sensitive areas.
- The city needs to institute developer fees as a dedicated funding source for open space acquisition.
- Stronger zoning requirements are needed to establish significant preservation areas and more discretionary review of future development proposals are needed.
- Stricter streetscape design guidelines are needed for developers.
- Additional zoning mechanisms are needed to address the problem of infill development and the large loss of open space as a result of home additions and individual land use decisions.
- The city needs to enhance its streetscapes and gateways to expand the citywide street tree program and protect existing trees and woodland areas.

LAND ACQUISITION AND OPEN SPACE - CONSULTANTS OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

- The department currently maintains 127 parks totaling approximately 964 acres.
- On a regional level, the City of Alexandria has 8,145 persons per square mile and is more dense than Arlington County at 7,315 persons per square mile. Fairfax County is a mere 2,385 persons per square mile.
- The city offers 7.5 acres per 1,000 residents, which is on par with highly dense cities. This compares with Baltimore at 7.5 acres per 1,000 residents, Chicago 4.3 acres per 1,000 residents, Los Angeles at 8.5 acres per 1,000 residents, New York and Philadelphia at 7.2 acres per 1,000 residents and San Francisco at 10.3 Acres per 1,000 residents.
- Planning District 1 contains perhaps the greatest number of citywide parks serving active space.
- While many of the city parks are in outstanding condition, maintenance issues were noted in a number of instances. These include: old, worn play equipment, overused turf areas (particularly on athletic fields), overgrown trails and stream banks, cracked pavement areas, and in more natural areas, the removal of invasive plants.

PARKS - KEY COMMUNITY ISSUES

The community of Alexandria would like the Parks, Recreation and Open Strategic Plan to address the following issues.

- Design parks to meet community needs and separate active sport areas from passive leisure activities.
- Develop a balanced approach to design that allows for passive, self-directed uses as well as active use.
- Develop a funding source to acquire land.
- Allow for customizing of parks during redevelopment to match the demographics of the neighborhood.
- Develop new park and open space guidelines for the Strategic Master Plan and for the city to follow.
- Develop multi-use paths to link and connect park facilities and open space to ease movement through the city.
- Address the lack of parking at recreation facilities and parks.
- More sports field space is needed to support the needs of youth and adults.
- Funding operational and capital needs is a major issue that needs to be addressed among all the other city priorities.

PARKS – CONSULTANTS OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

- Place a high priority on protecting and enhancing the city's stream valleys and other natural resource areas. This includes the creation of clean stream channels--"less engineered" stream banks.
- Enhance existing streetscapes so they become a secondary park system.
- Identify and enforce all existing public easements; these could become important trail linkages and small open space areas.
- Minimize surface parking lots; locating parking underground where possible and using the surface areas as open space and park opportunities.
- Define and develop gateways to the city, along streets, highways, and trails.
- Make better use of open space areas around school properties for habitats, gardens, and educational and community opportunities.
- Create a new zoning classification: a horticultural zone.
- More dollars are needed from developers for open space to support higher density development than what the city is getting currently.
- Create a continuous open space along the Potomac River waterfront.
- The creation of significant public open space in the Eisenhower Avenue corridor is needed.
- Create new open space opportunities in the west end and the northeast portion of Old Town.
- Develop Park Master Plan for each of the city's existing parks to guide short term and long term needs.
- Develop a significant forestry program.

RECREATION FACILITIES - KEY COMMUNITY ISSUES

- Continually retrofit and improve existing parks to new design standards
- Add to existing facilities where appropriate to maximize space and use.
- Update existing facilities to year 2003 standards and design to create operational revenues to offset operating costs.
- Update color schemes and image of many recreation facilities.
- Lack of storage, parking, weight room space and program space needs to be addressed.
- Acceptable level of maintenance is needed at all facilities.

RECREATION FACILITIES – CONSULTANTS OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

- Maintenance levels of recreation facilities and parks need to be enhanced
- The city needs to address the changing demographics of the community as it applies to recreation programs, parks and recreation facilities.
- More athletic facilities are needed.
- The city needs to involve the business community and other partners in solving key issues.

Findings & Observations

- More programs for youth and seniors are needed.
- School facilities need to be used as community assets.
- The city needs to find creative ways to adapt the re-use of facilities that receive little use.
- The city needs to find a balance between active and passive park space.
- Position the system to tap into new sources of funding, while providing inclusion for all who want to participate.
- Deal with the perceived need for more dog parks.
- Allow for the provision of new types of recreation amenities such as skate parks, trails, and connectivity to places of public value.
- Work with developers to create more public spaces and appropriate land uses, and to provide public amenities.
- Find strategies to keep teens engaged in productive activities beyond the early teens.
- Address the increased demand for organized sports programs.
- Serve the special needs of people with disabilities.
- Provide adequate space for seniors.
- Effectively deal with the before and after-school needs of young people.

RECREATION PROGRAMS – KEY COMMUNITY ISSUES

- Identify and establish achievable levels of service rather than trying to be all things to all people.
- Beautification of the city needs to be a priority.
- Adequately fund the park and recreation system.
- Find appropriate partners who can help the city deliver services.
- Stay current with citizens' needs and finding effective methods to meet those needs.
- Better coordination with the school system is needed.
- Develop larger recreation facilities that address the multi-generational make-up of the community.
- Manage the aging infrastructure.

RECREATION PROGRAMS – CONSULTANTS OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

- Fees for programs are low or non-existent for the value received.
- A cost recovery system needs to be established that provides for a reasonable Return On Investment, balanced against the need to provide core services at minimal or not costs.
- The department needs a better method of tracking participation in its programs.
- Consistent standards between programs need to be developed.
- The department is inconsistent in how it addresses policies and procedures in its programs.
- The department lacks a strategy on how to replace worn out or broken equipment.

Findings & Observations

- The department needs to provide more training to key staff members on benefits based marketing, program evaluation, basic accounting, and program tracking.
- Development of additional equitable partnerships with other service providers is needed.
- Development of an equitable and consistent city/school use agreement is needed.
- Create more practice field space to keep game fields in good condition.
- The city does not differentiate between the city's core recreation services and non-core services.
- A transportation plan is needed to get people to recreation facilities.
- More enhancements of programs are needed for people with disabilities.
- There appears to be several safety issues with the mechanical areas of the aquatic facilities.
- Facility space for contract classes is limited because of a lack of program space.
- There appears to be inconsistency between contract classes that are fee based and similar free programs offered at recreation centers.
- Arts Programs are heavily subsidized.
- There are great opportunities for sponsorships and other revenue enhancing activities for the Arts Programs.
- Fees for room rentals are below market price for the value of the space.
- Senior programs have high levels of tax subsidy for the value of the experience.
- Senior Centers and program offerings are geographically concentrated on the east side of Alexandria.
- Special Events are heavily subsidized with no revenue return to the department.
- Youth Sports programs are limited by field and facility availability.
- The youth sports programs are heavily subsidized.
- Core programs consisted of Adult Sports, After-School Programs, Playground and Summer Camp, Aquatics, Contract Classes, Cultural Arts/Performing Arts, Facility Rentals, Family Programs, Senior Programs, Special Events, Therapeutic Recreation Programs, Volunteers, Wellness and Fitness and Youth Sports.
- There is a lack of adequate sized fields for coed and men's softball.
- There is a lack of lighted fields for evening use.
- Parking at recreation facilities is inadequate.
- There are few gymnasiums available for use by adults.
- Fees for adult sports are designed to cover program costs.
- The city has a procedure for charging non-residents a higher fee.
- Several of the after-school and summer camp programs are licensed.
- The department has a great opportunity to capture a large portion of the summer program market by adding activities such as adventure programs and non-traditional sports programs targeted at teens.
- There is a good partnership with the use of schools to help host programs.
- A comprehensive fee schedule has been developed for the Aquatic facilities.
- Operating costs for the four seasonal mini-pools appear to be high.
- The department has developed a pool of qualified staff to support aquatics.
- There is a demand for aquatic services that is more than the present pools can provide.

Findings & Observations

- A variety of courses and programs are offered and serve a wide demographic group.
- Program offerings are limited by facility size and availability.
- Contract classes had over 3,500 registrations in 2001, which is below average for the size of Alexandria. More indoor space is needed to increase this level of participation.
- The cancellation rate is low at 10% for contract classes.
- The Cultural Arts and Performing Arts programs have participation rates of between 7,000 to 130,000 people.
- The Arts Programs provide a positive economic impact for the city.
- Rentals at Lee Center are at maximum capacity.
- Special events provide an untapped opportunity for revenue development and promoting the department.
- The therapeutic program is nearly 100% subsidized while in other community's subsidy levels are 80% - 90%.
- There appears the opportunity to partner with many agencies on therapeutic services.
- Fitness programs are very popular and the demand outstrips capacity.
- Fees for fitness facilities are inconsistent.

MARKETING – KEY COMMUNITY ISSUES

- Coordination between divisions and recreation centers needs to be developed between promotions and program services.
- The department does not have an assigned marketing person for marketing the services provided which creates a lot of inconsistencies in how information gets distributed to the community.
- The department needs to centralize the marketing function and operations to increase effectiveness and consistency.
- The department is very reactionary in its approach to marketing versus proactive.
- Cross promotions have not been explored in-house or with outside agencies.
- Marketing strategies are not fully developed or implemented.
- Promotional distribution materials need to be expanded beyond just the schools.
- The budget for marketing is very limited for the number of programs and services provided.
- There is little market research done as it applies to customer feedback from programs and events.
- Sponsorships are not pursued even though there are great opportunities to attract sponsors to underwrite programs and events.
- The staff is stretched to their limits in trying to manage multiple operations outside of their expertise and experience in regards to marketing.

MARKETING – CONSULTANTS OBSERVATION AND FINDINGS

- The staff could be better equipped with the appropriate technology to produce their own in-house publications that go beyond the basic flyer. For example, this could include newsletters and quarterly brochures.
- Staff understands the purpose of having a good image, but it is difficult to develop image improvements, such as a unique logo, due to limited time and resources.
- The staffs have to work through a PIO officer at city hall that selects programs or events for publication.
- There is little time to track the effectiveness of any promotions.
- No paid advertising is used to help support promotional costs.
- Although the staff is in the process of creating a marketing plan for the department, there is not a current one available. Most of the marketing efforts are reactionary rather than planned.

VOLUNTEERISM - KEY COMMUNITY ISSUES

- There are many areas in the system where volunteers could be used more.
- The organization of volunteer operations is not coordinated or managed by a specific division or person, which creates inconsistencies.
- There is an issue with communicating to the volunteers. Volunteers would like to have something more directed for them in information and opportunities.
- Tracking of volunteer hours is not coordinated and each division has its own method for collecting the information, or it is not collected at all.
- Training is not offered to volunteers in all cases.
- There is no standard orientation process for new volunteers.
- The department does not have a system-wide volunteer recognition program that allows all volunteers from each program area the opportunity to understand the diversity of volunteer accomplishment throughout the parks and recreation department.
- The department does not have standardized forms and procedures to streamline operations and reduce staff workload regarding volunteer recruitment and management.
- The liability waivers are an issue in that there is conflicting information about the types necessary for each area.
- Most areas do not have volunteer job descriptions so that both staff and volunteers understand the skills needed, the expectations, and purpose of each job.

VOLUNTEERISM – CONSULTANT OBSERVATION AND FINDINGS

- A volunteer manual and guidelines is not in place to guide staff in volunteerism.
- There is no comprehensive listing of long and short-term volunteer opportunities.
- The department is lacking volunteer policies and staff training on managing volunteers.
- The department does not have a work-alone policy in place. This policy states constant supervision should be in place when volunteers are working or two or more volunteers must work in a group versus working alone. This is for safety purposes.
- With the exception of youth sport programs, screening of volunteers is done on a limited basis. There is no standard orientation for volunteers and training needs to be enhanced.